Research Proposal

Partition through the Eyes of Women: A Study of Selected Fictional and Non-Fictional Writings of Attia Hosain, Shauna Singh Baldwin and Urvashi Butalia

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Research Problem

Those who do not know their history are condemned to repeat to it. The statement gives us enough reason to say that the year 1947 in Indian history can never be forgotten. Partition, *Vibhajan*, *Bantwara* or *Takseem* - these words carry very grave implications. People were scattered overnight, friends became enemies, homes became strange places, or to borrow the appropriate phrase from Amitav Ghosh, millions were left "with no home but in memory'. As a moment of rupture, it marked the termination of one regime (colonial British Empire) and the inauguration of two new ones - India and Pakistan.

There are still some people who speak of Partition but not about Independence, as the event of 1947, which shaped their lives. The reason for Partition could have been anything –political, communal, religious or just a state of sheer frenzy but its implications were tremendous and women, especially, were the mute spectators of it all and the worst receivers of the events that took place in its wake.

The two faces of Partition and the independence of India in 1947 are not separate, for the two condition and constitute each other. While the 'ruling' or privileged class of politicians were celebrating the joys of freedom, the refugees were unable to do so. For them, it was a question of survival. For them, independence meant struggling to live. It was in the bloodletting of Partition that the meaning of independence was to be found by many ordinary people. Those ordinary people were mostly women, people on the margins and with no voice of their own. Till very recently, the history of Partition was read essentially only as history emphasising men's experiences. Women were seen as small players who did not seem to have distinctive experiences of their own and who simply followed their men's commands, succumbing to them in order to save the 'honour' of their families and communities. These were women who - in spite of the horrifying experiences of abduction, lootings, sexual violence, widowhood, psychological and emotional strains and loss of families - had to

get on with their lives and fashion new strategies of survival in a completely alien land.

However, this was not always the case with women in ancient India. Until the Vedic period, women used to enjoy an equivalent position to men. They would accompany their husbands to all the important events and take part in important decisions. But in the post Vedic period, women started losing this revered position and respect in society. Out of the many factors that contributed to the declining status of women, an important one was the invasion of foreign forces. With the Muslim invaders came the *purdah* system and women were limited to the *zenanas* to save them from molestation and abduction at the hands of Muslim soldiers and rulers. From that time onwards, it has been observed that women were treated like objects of possession and were considered the repositories of their family's honour. Since the chastity of women was considered the honour of her male counterpart, she became the object of revenge and has since been treated as such.

In my thesis, I propose to analyze selected fictional (viz. novels and short stories) and non fictional works by three women writers- Attia Hosain, Shauna Singh Baldwin and Urvashi Butalia, which are set against the backdrop of Partition and deal with women's experiences of trauma and suffering. I will explore how these writers portray the horrors of Partition in their narratives through their women characters and examine the manner in which they interweave memories with their construction of India - pre and post Partition - along with the description of those who were at the service of aristocracy and the privileged class itself.

The questions I will thus investigate are: Is the history of women the same as that of the history of men? Do significant turning points in history have the same impact for one sex as for the other? How did women experience the anguish of the division of land and the euphoria/ trauma of the newly-formed nation? How a woman's identity - carved by the notions of moral order - acts as a deterrent in order that her voice be heard? Were violence, war and communalism desired by women during Partition? How did the general non-violent nature of women put them at the receiving end of brutal violence, as its innocent victims? How do women characters view their plight, as presented in the works selected as primary readings? Are we still an intolerant society? Are we still divided? How reliable is (subjective) memory when remembering something that you would rather forget?

Though it has been a long accepted fact in historical writings that Partition was a period of enormous turmoil, severe dislocations and re-adjustments, historical

work on the bitter experiences of the people - especially the women - has only barely got underway. Especially, when it comes to the focus of historical writings, it had - for a long time - been on men as agents and on state policies, political events and negotiations leading to Partition. In other words, it has largely been a history of blame focussing on causation and the workings of elite politics.

However, a change in historical studies did come about in the 1980s; from then on, increasing attention has been paid to several other aspects of social history. What is asserted is a need to look at the 'history from below'. In this regard, the contribution of historians rewriting history from a gendered perspective has been immense - especially in foregrounding women's agency and locating women as repositories or carriers of a socio-cultural legacy.

I, therefore, hypothesize that women's experiences of the Partition cannot be looked at through a single lens as it does not take into cognizance many factors which choked the voice of the second sex. We are required to look at it from the standpoint of gender, age-old traditions, the structure of society at the time of pre and post-Partition as much as the political events, all of which played a crucial part in this epoch-making event.

In testing my hypothesis, I will compare and contrast selected novels and short stories, analyzing each for the social and psychological implications of Partition with respect to the the victim-woman's experience and listen to her voice within the text to arrive at points of intersection and departure within the larger framework of identity, religion, culture and nation.

Working Definition of Terms

Partition: The process of dividing the Indian subcontinent along sectarian lines which took place in 1947, resulting in the emergence of two separate and sovereign states, as India gained its independence from the British Raj. The northern, predominantly Muslim, sections of India became the nation of Pakistan, while the southern and majority Hindu sections became the Republic of India. References would also be made to the Bangladesh (East Pakistan) Partition but those would be few and far between. For purposes of the present study, the term would be used to refer only to the Indo-Pak divide.

Long Partition: The long-term process of official engagement (by both Pakistan and India) with migration, return, and belonging that helped to constitute, amidst much contingency and bureaucratic violence, the meaning of separate nations and states. This was because Partition eluded easy 'closure' in the years

after 1947 as it was a development that put the very process of making modern nation-states to trial and scrutiny.

History: The discipline that rewards and interprets past events involving human beings. The term would be used in the present context to study past events - particularly in human affairs - before and after the Partition and which are preserved in creative writings. Apart from how the selected women authors remember the time of Partition through the lives and times of their women characters in their writings, a few established texts of history will also be consulted and referred to. In the context of the present study, the term would therefore be used mostly to denote history or historical events as remembered by women characters and represented by women authors in the primary texts selected for the study. The term will thus be used in the traditional sense wherein all accounts/ textual representations of the past are understood and labelled as 'historical' texts. The events by themselves are not 'history', for the simple reason that one cannot catch them.

Memory: The faculty by which the mind stores and remembers information and/or experience from the past. Here, the term would be used in the sense of how women (as sufferers/ victims) recall/ remember past events in an amorphous, non-linear manner.

Background

'Partition is difficult to forget but dangerous to remember', the Indian writer - Krishna Sobti - once famously declared. That perhaps explains the reluctance of historians in South Asia to embark on the social and oral history of one of the greatest social dislocations of the past century. A theme to which relatively less attention has been paid in the general context of Partition Studies is the humanistic perspective which can provide the reader with sensitive insights into an episode that has rightly been regarded as 'one of the greatest human convulsions of history.' In a short span of a few months, 12 million people moved across the newly demarcated boundaries in the plight that is hard to associate with civilized human existence. It is, however, the rationale and impact of the violence, loot, rape, arson and carnage that came with the Partition, the disruption of relationships, the dislocation of identities, the turbulence of the times and the human costs of the tragedy, that have not been much reckoned. The impact of the holocaust on ordinary lives in all its gruesome entirety has largely escaped academic attention. As Ian Talbot points out, 'In this great human event, human voices are strangely silent.'

Needless to say that political studies on almost all aspects of the freedom struggle remain a much-debated and contentious theme for historical analysis of both India and Pakistan. It is the other side of the problem, the manner in which the fabric of daily life was ripped apart for millions of people in the communally sensitive regions, that has largely been neglected. And, so has been neglected the sense of loss and the displacement brought about by the Partition, for many held the strong belief that they would not have to leave the environs they had spent their lives in. Such a state of mind is rightly expressed by former Jamaican cultural critic, Stuart Hall: 'You can't 'go home' again...I knew England from the inside. But I'm not and never will be 'English'. I know both places intimately, but I am not wholly of either place.' That is exactly the experience of dislocation/ displacement, far away enough to experience a sense of exile and loss and close enough to understand the enigma of an always postponed 'arrival'.

Those who left their home during the Partition harboured a hope that they would return when things would be slightly back to normal but little did they know that a history was being created and that they would not get to smell their earth again. That sense of loss became part of their life and psyche. This unsettlement was far worse for women because, for them, their home was their world as the nurturer of the family and the outside world was limited to them. In this largest ever mass migration of people, violence against women became the norm. Thousands of women committed suicide or were done to death by their own kinsmen. A young woman might have been separated from her family, abducted by people of another religion, forced to convert and/or forced into marriage or co-habitation. After bearing a child, she would be offered the opportunity to return only if she left her child behind and if she could face the shame in her natal community. These stories do not paint their subjects as victims. Theirs are the stories of battles over gender, the body, sexuality and nationalism; stories of women fighting for dignity and identity.

Saadat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chugtai, Krishna Sobti, Mohinder Singh Sarna and Khushwant Singh are some of the writers who have described the horrors of Partition and its effect on a divided people. Among them, Sadat Hasan Manto is a distinguished figure who - himself having experienced the Partition at close quarters - writes poignantly about the minute details of human existence during this horrific time. His stories depict how the killing kept going on and how the point of revenge was zeroed in on women. The violence of the Partition was not a fight for religion but of power because no religion believes in the killing of innocent people.

Among the primary works chosen for this study is Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) which unsettles the seamless and often patriarchal telling of the history of Independence. Hosain writes about high politics before Independence and revisits memory lanes which were occupied by people who she grew up with. Her writings amalgamate the life of the peasants and the aristocracy, and resonate with the inner silence of women who could not commit themselves to any political reason but their fight was for an independence from the shackles of culture and the societal boundaries created for them. Hosain, who preferred living on in London rather than going back to Pakistan, recalled years later that events during and after the Partition continued to be very painful to her because it made her a stranger everywhere in the deeper areas of her mind and spirit except where she was born and brought up.

Phoenix Fled (1953) by Hosain contains twelve heart-rending, poignant and enigmatic stories that linger on in the reader's mind and one cannot get away without empathising with the characters and feeling the unsaid in them. The stories are profound and deal with the life of the rural and the urban class, the aristocracy and the peasantry, in a prose as vivid and vital as the landscape that Hosain describes. Most of the protagonists in the stories, including women, are seen dealing with an internal fear, resentment about which they are not aware themselves and, therefore, are always blaming *kismat* for the happenings in their life. Hosain's experience of living in India before Partition and then in the West thereafter, is one of the primary reasons that her writing is full of all kinds of possible human sentiments.

Shauna Singh Baldwin's novel *What the Body Remembers* (2000) builds on feminist historiography, against the backdrop of the Partition, in order to exhume and retell the story of family violence against women, intended apparently to 'save their honour' from the rioting, murderous mobs, during India's Partition. Baldwin explores the embodied character of Sikh-subject formation in a pre-Partition border-community and shows how the woman's dismembered, remembered body in the text allegorizes the process of disfigurement through which women's bodies are routinely produced as 'dead metaphors' for patriarchal honour.

Baldwin's short story collection, *English Lessons and Other Stories* (1999), too takes the reader back and forth in the world of two cultures - the East and the West (like Hosain's) – and, at the same time, keeps the intricate threads of family and the cultural clashes on one surface, binding one with another. Baldwin presents a kaleidoscope of issues highlighting different patterns that are always changing in raking up issues like the clash of cultures, sexual, social, racial and religious chauvinism, ancient enmities, generational

misunderstandings and the stressful adjustments of immigrants, among others. She has a good measure of compassion for the characters, especially the women in her complex and multi-layered stories.

Urvashi Butalia's non-fictional work entitled *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (1998) is a moving account of the Partition of India. As history is mostly written and viewed as a single gender concern, this one accounts for all the horror that women had to go through. Families, however, have silenced the history of women. Butalia, therefore, brings this out and questions our views on our own prejudices which - more often than not - we are so happy to comply with. Through interviews conducted over a ten-year period of people who either lived in the time of Partition or have inherited its memories from their ancestors, and by an examination of diaries, letters, memoirs, and parliamentary documents, she asks how people on the margins of history - children, women, ordinary people, the lower castes, the untouchables - were affected by this massive upheaval. Throughout, the author reflects on such difficult questions as what did community, caste and gender have to do with the violence that accompanied the Partition? What was the Partition meant to achieve and what did it actually achieve? How, through unspeakable horrors, did the survivors go on?

Though *The Other Side of Silence* is not a work of fiction, the stories compiled in it are equally palpable. Going through it, one cannot help but feel the pain of separating from one's family and the joy of re-uniting with them. The work fills the gaps in the official version of the Partition for it deals with the task of retrieving memory as a self-conscious, self- reflexive exercise covering the tragedy of human life as a shared event and portraying the loss which filters from the community to the individual. The work thus reveals the impact of shared histories, hinting at larger tragedies through individual losses by way of a kind of emplotment of memory.

Each of these writers has dealt with Partition and the position of women in it in her own style and manner but the underlying current of compassion for humanity within the family, community, society and culture, is not very different. They let us sneak into the world and time that we did not see or live in, and in a subtle way make the reader look for the traces and listen to women's voices which had been gagged for long.

With the publication of such works on women and the Partition, it is my hope that the present research will add to the existing scholarship by further defining how the Partition traumatised the female population and in some ways also

helped them to rethink about themselves, beyond their emotional state, to deconstruct and then to reconstruct their identity.

Review of Literature

Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's *Borders and Boundaries* (1998) attempts a 'gendered' reading of Partition through the experiences of women. It provides a background on the events leading to the Partition, consideration of its possible causes and the horrifying violence that came with it. The authors argue that the violence against women in particular during the Partition such as public parading of nude women, amputation of breasts, tattooing with religious symbols, and rape, shows that women's bodies served as territory to be claimed, conquered and marked. In their own words, women 'became the respective countries, indelibly imprinted by the Other.' Additionally, the threat of sexual violence against women, in the light of the prevailing cultural belief that safeguarding the female is essential to upholding both male and community honour, led to yet another form of violence: men killing their own family members. We must, therefore, understand the events of Partition from the point of view of the women as a continuum of violence that had death at the hand of one's own kinsmen at one end and rape and brutalisation by men of other communities at the other.

The book thus changes the established pattern with its premise that while there are plenty of official accounts of the Partition, there are only a few social histories and no feminist histories. It provides first-hand accounts and memoirs, juxtaposed alongside government accounts, with the author making women not only visible but central. Menon and Bhasin explore what country, nation, and religious identity means for women, and address the questions pertaining to the nation-state and the gendering of citizenship.

Sudhir Kakar's book *The Colors of Violence* (1996) is about the victims and the perpetrators of communal violence. For decades, India has been intermittently tormented by brutal outbursts of religious violence, thrusting many ordinary Hindus and Muslims into a bloody conflict. This work analyzes the psychological roots of Hindu-Muslim violence and examines the subjective experience of religious hatred in the author's native land. Kakar discusses the profoundly enigmatic relations that link individual egos to cultural moralities and religious violence. His psychological approach offers a framework for understanding the kind of ethnic-religious conflict that characterizes the turmoil in India.

The Great Partition (2008) by Yasmin Khan examines the context, execution, and aftermath of Partition, weaving together local politics and ordinary lives with the larger political forces at play. Khan shows that by the end of 1945, confusion and uncertainty dominated everywhere in India. The sole certainty was that the British would leave soon. One of the strengths of the book is that it clearly maps the collapse of British authority, something that most accounts miss. The bizarre counterpoint to this is that as violence spiralled out of control in 1946, there were almost no attacks on the British. The book is an intelligent and timely analysis of the Partition, the haste and recklessness with which it was completed and the damaging legacy left in its wake.

Changing Homelands (2011) offers a startling new perspective on what was and was not politically possible in late colonial India. In this highly readable account of the Partition in the Punjab, Neeti Nair rejects the idea that essential differences between the Hindu and the Muslim communities made political settlement impossible. Far from being an inevitable solution, the idea of Partition was a very late, stunning surprise to the majority of Hindus in the region. In tracing the political and social history of the Punjab from the early years of the twentieth century, Nair overturns the entrenched view that Muslims were responsible for the Partition of India. Some powerful Punjabi Hindus also preferred the Partition and contributed to its adoption. Almost no one, however, foresaw the deaths and devastation that would follow.

Though much has been written on the politics of the Muslim and the Sikh communities in the Punjab, Nair is the first historian to focus on the Hindu minority, both before and long after the divide of 1947. She engages with politics in post-Partition India by drawing on oral histories that reveal the complex relationship between recalled memory and narrative history that continues to inform the politics between India and Pakistan. The book thus offers a new outlook on the Partition narrative by rejecting the long-rooted belief that Partition was desired by the Hindu community and concluding that, in fact, it was as undesirable for the Hindus and the Sikhs as for the Muslims.

Reconstructing the Bengal Partition: The Psyche Under a Different Violence (2013) by Jayanti Basu is a psychological study of the Bengal Partition, a traumatic time that remains in the psyche of the generation - and its successive one - who faced it. The author works on the premise that although violence - in terms of bloodshed, abduction and rape - was less in Bengal as compared to Punjab but the suffering was just as much. It was pain of a different kind. From this perspective, violence ceases to be only a violation of the body, but of the mind as well.

The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India (2007) by Jasodhara Bagchi and Shubhoranjan Dasgupta talks about how the Partition of Bengal, despite some obvious political movements, is different from the Partition of Punjab. While Partition in West India was a one-time event with mayhem and forced migration restricted primarily to three years (1947-1950), the Partition of Bengal has turned out to be a continuing process. There is, however, one compelling similarity between the experiences in Punjab and Bengal. In both these divided states, women were targetted as the prime object of persecution. The trauma of displacement, rape and loss, are some of the reasons which led Bengal's women to abandon their meek and sacrificial image and land on the mean streets.

Mushirul Hassan's article entitled "In Memories of a Fragmented Nation: Rewriting the Histories of India's Partition", in *Economic and Political Weekly* (33.41, 1998, 2662-2668), attempts to ask as to why do we still talk about Partition and especially on the occasion of Independence Day and other notable historic days. He mentions that the Partition was essentially caused because of the leaders of the subcontinent and their inability to resolve their perennial disputes over power-sharing. Also, the role of the colonial government cannot be ignored. Keeping all this in mind, he analyzes as to what led to the Partition and what history of pre-Partition India are we still proud of. He does accept the fact that the creation of Pakistan, as a result of the Partition of the country, had no significance or relevance to the millions living in India or Pakistan. They were simply caught up in religious hatred and which nobody realised at that time.

Urvashi Butalia, in her article entitled "Community, State and Gender: On Women's Agency during Partition" in *Economic and Political Weekly* (28.17, 1993) talks about how we cannot set a date as to when the Partition actually started and ended, as we are still living it its aftermath. Butalia talks about 1984 Sikh riots which made her look back to the Partition days and pick up the threads from there. She, then, shifts her attention to the reason why women were victims of communal violence when they did not even actively participate in the struggle. Butalia thus poses many questions and urges the reader not to make any sweeping assumptions about the power of women without taking into cognizance the complexities of their long struggle.

Tentative Chapter Plan

1. Introduction: Women's Response to the Experience and the Trauma of the 'Long' Partition

While there have been many books looking at the diplomacy and high politics of the Partition, and numerous biographies (of Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah and Mountbatten), it is only very recently that studies have appeared drawing on the testimony of those who lived through the mayhem and still carry in their hearts the vestiges of a 'long Partition'. With this introduction in and as the first chapter, I plan to straightaway focus on Attia Hosain's novel *Sunlight on...* to study the social and cultural fabric that was interwoven against the framework of family and community since *izzat* and *sharam* are the two issues which at that time were a matter of life and death. I will also take into account her short-story collection *Phoenix Fled* with respect to the shaping of the image of womanhood as pure and loyal carrying all along the burden of morality, struggle, sacrifice and self-denial, especially in a time of acute crisis. The emphasis will thus be on how Hosain describes the social structures which alternately permit and prohibit her women characters' limited freedom.

2. Examining Women's Agency against the backdrop of the historiographical silence in the wake of Partition

The second chapter proposes to analyse Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* as well as her collection of short stories entitled *English Lessons*, for women's agency, if any, during the horrific time and even after. While feminist historiographies have restored Partition survivors' memories of violence to the historical archives, Baldwin's prose and fiction explicitly foreground the role of gendered bodies in and as the archive of communal memories of violence.

3. Listening for Women's Voices during the Partition:

The third chapter will attempt to examine Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence...* in order to understand as to how and why certain events become shrouded in silence by tracing facets of Butalia's own poignant and Partition-scarred family history before investigating the stories of other people and their experiences of the effects of this violent disruption. Believing that only by remembering and telling their stories can those affected begin the process of healing and forgetting, Butalia presents a sensitive and moving account of her quest to listen to the painful truth behind the silence.

4. Hyphenated Perspectives: The Psychology behind Violence and its Memory

The fourth chapter will detail as to why women are considered the repositories of family honour and explore the male psyche behind committing heinous atrocities against women. I intend to refer to creative works of writers such as Krishna Sobti, Bapsi Sidhwa, Saadat Hasan Manto, Mohsin Hamid, Intizar Husain and critical works such as those by Sudhir Kakar, etc. in order to get a wider perspective on and of the issue, and use that insight to thus enter the works of the primary writers from the standpoints of Sociology and Psychology as well.

5. Conclusion: Religious Conflicts, Cultural Identities and the Making of Nations

The fifth and last chapter will investigate whether we have moved on from our horrendous past. It will also study the diasporic experience, current social issues in relation to the countries that were separated from India, viz. Pakistan and Bangladesh, and how the Partition was experienced by people from both sides of the Indian border along with a discussion of how that ghastly event still continues to haunt us and them.

Methodology

My research methodology would include close reading, interpreting and comparing/ contrasting primary sources which include both fiction and non-fiction. Fiction and non-fiction combined together give a holistic view and broaden our understanding on any particular study. It may be understood more clearly by one of the key assumptions of H. Aram Vesser in his book entitled *The New Historicism* (1989) that "literary and non-literary 'texts' are equally valuable". While fiction lets us peep into the author's time and environment in which she/ he has written, non-fiction reveals how a critic's response is affected by his environment, beliefs and prejudices. Moreover, New Historicists do not believe that we can look at history objectively, but rather that we interpret events as products of our time and culture and that the facts that we derive are somewhat subjective.

I will also use biographical and historical material, including books on contemporary cultural studies, in order to establish the social and political climate in which the writers wrote. I will support my findings with a significant

number of critical essays on the theme of Partition, its violence and the silence that came with it, by correlating narrative history with recalled (individual/ cultural) memory. The approach will be interdisciplinary, focussing on socio-political and historical subjects in relation to the Partition and its effect on the human psyche (especially women's) along with books on religion, culture and tradition, all of which form the identity of women in any given period of human history.

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